



Helping Adult Learners Navigate Community College and the Labor Market

Introduction

In the wake of the 2008 recession, millions of unemployed and underemployed American workers are at a crossroads. For many, the jobs they lost are not coming back, and many of the jobs now available will not provide economic security or advancement opportunities. Facing the prospect of long-term unemployment or the inability to provide adequately for their families, many workers are turning to community colleges for a new direction. Between 2007 and 2010, community college enrollment rose to 8.2 million students, an increase of 20 percent or 1.4 million students.¹ Today, community colleges are playing a critical role in our country's response to the recession. And, many are successfully responding to these economic challenges by training workers with skills demanded by employers. Yet, as some adult learners and workers enter community colleges around the country, they often find that their unique needs cannot be met. As a result, many face obstacles to completing education programs that would help them gain traction in the labor market.

Seventy-five percent of today's community college students are juggling family

responsibilities, work and school.² Many of these students are not performing well academically, some research suggests. Part-time students, in particular, as well as minority and low-income students, are much less likely than other community college students to earn a degree or certificate. Older students who attend part time also struggle to complete a degree or certificate.³ The primary reason that students drop out of community college and university is due to the stress of combining work and school,⁴ according to a national survey of college students ages 22 to 30.

Even when students persist and complete their training, they may have trouble getting a well-paying job, particularly at a time when jobs remain scarce. Some adult learners do not have the professional networks they need to find a job. They may also lack effective job search or job interviewing skills. Sometimes they find out their new skills are not what employers want.

Much is known about the challenges that adults face in completing community college programs and successfully entering the labor market. But, comprehensive data is still lacking on their graduation rate, job placement

¹ Phillipe, Kent and Christopher Mullin. "Community College Estimated Growth: Fall 2011," *American Association of Community Colleges*, February 2011. <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Publications/Reports/Documents/CommunityGrowth.pdf> (accessed 11 October 2011).

² Complete College America, "Time is the Enemy: The Surprising Truth About Why Today's College Students Aren't Graduating...And What Needs to Change," 2011. http://www.completecollege.org/docs/Time_Is_the_Enemy_Summary.pdf (accessed 20 October 2011).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Public Agenda, "With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them," Report prepared for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, December 2009, <http://www.publicagenda.org/theirwholivesaheadofthem> (accessed 28 December 2012).

success and earnings. Because government data systems largely focus on full-time students enrolled in community college for the first time,⁵ there is not yet a deep understanding of the employment and earnings outcomes of all students who graduate from community colleges with degrees and certificates. Outcome measures and data used to track community college students have not kept pace with the changing characteristics of the student population or the changing mission of the colleges. Instead, they reflect a bygone day when community colleges were designed to serve students coming out of high school, who attended full time and then transitioned to a four-year school. As this brief documents, other community college systems and processes also are not aligned with what many of today's students need to succeed.

Despite policymakers' calls to increase the number of U.S. workers who have post-secondary certificates and degrees, sending more people to community college for training is not the solution *if* nothing is done to address the systemic barriers that prevent students from completing college and *if* nothing is done to help colleges improve their programs so unemployed and underemployed people get the skills they need to succeed in the labor market. If the U.S. is serious about building a workforce to meet the needs of the 21st Century, more must be done to increase community college completion rates. This means doing more to support adult learners who rely on community colleges for career advancement opportunities.

In today's economy, adults are struggling to find resources to pay for tuition, fees and other expenses involved in pursuing skills development or job training. While community college enrollment has increased, the colleges have been forced to do more with fewer resources, thanks to federal, state and local government budget cuts. In a number of communities across the country, nonprofit organizations are working with the same adult learners who are showing up on community college campuses. And, many of these nonprofits are teaming up with community colleges, aligning their resources and investments in order to help more adult learners succeed in the classroom and the labor market.

What are C2E Strategies?

C2E strategies are workforce development approaches that focus on helping non-traditional students, typically low-income, working adults, to:

- **Combine the strengths of community colleges and local workforce nonprofits**, in order to serve students more effectively than either could alone.
- **Target a specific industry or cluster of occupations**, developing a deep understanding of the interrelationships between business competitiveness and the workforce needs of the targeted industry.
- **Support workers in improving their workplace skills**, enhancing their ability to compete for higher-quality jobs.
- **Support students in persisting on an education pathway**, providing motivational support and counseling, as well as access to needed social services and academic supports, including basic skills development.
- **Provide labor market navigation services** that help students find jobs and build the professional networks and communication skills they need to retain jobs and succeed within a local industry.

From 2008 to 2010, the Aspen Institute's Workforce Strategies Initiative (AspenWSI), with funding from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, conducted Courses to Employment (C2E), a study of six nonprofit-community college partnerships serving low-income communities and workers. AspenWSI's interest in these partnerships grew out of its research on sectoral strategies that connect workers to opportunities in specific industries. This earlier research found that collaboration across multiple institutions usually is required to meet low-income workers' academic, support-service and employment needs, as well as employers' workforce needs. Increasingly, nonprofits and community colleges are coming together and leveraging their individual strengths to help workers build skills and obtain quality employment.

⁵ Committee on Measures of Student Success, "A Report to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan," December 2011, <http://www2.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/cmss-committee-report-final.pdf> (accessed 28 December 2012).

Through C2E, AspenWSI sought to learn what services these collaborations provide to low-income workers, what roles and responsibilities the different institutions assume, how the partners fund and support their efforts, and what education and employment outcomes were achieved by the students served. The findings on students' outcomes are encouraging, clearly showing that these partnerships help students persist in college to complete training and obtain a better job once their training is finished.⁶ To help students accomplish these goals, however, partnerships must address a number of student barriers or “traps” on the path to college enrollment, completion, and employment or career advancement.

This brief describes some of those traps, as identified by adult learners and workforce leaders at the community colleges and nonprofits involved in the C2E partnerships. It also offers examples of strategies that C2E partnerships use to address these traps. This is valuable information for community colleges, nonprofit organizations and others involved in workforce development, highlighting issues and strategies to consider when working to better support adult learners on community college campuses. In addition, this report provides useful information for policymakers and investors about the results that post-secondary education, community colleges and nonprofits can achieve by working together, with proper resources, to help adult learners overcome considerable challenges.

Courses to Employment: Sectoral Approaches to Community College-Nonprofit Partnerships

Courses to Employment was a three-year demonstration project funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and implemented by the Aspen Institute's Workforce Strategies Initiative (AspenWSI). The project involved studying six partnerships from around the country that offer low-income participants a range of academic and non-academic supports to help them achieve educational and employment goals related to a particular industry sector. The six participating partnerships are:

- The **Automobile Career Pathways Project** in Seattle is a partnership between the Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County and Shoreline Community College. The partnership offers a short-term certificate, the General Service Technician (GST) that prepares students with low basic skills or limited English-language skills for entry-level careers in automotive servicing. The GST program involves two semesters of technical training, integrated with basic English and math skills, followed by a one-semester internship with an automotive services employer. In addition, students receive services from the project's Career Navigator, who accesses a range of resources to help students cover tuition and other academic expenses, as well as living expenses such as rent, transportation, child care and other personal needs. The Career Navigator often works with college faculty to arrange internships and employment opportunities for GST students and helps graduates plan further education and career advancement.
- In central Texas, a partnership between **Capital IDEA**, a nonprofit organization, and **Austin Community College** helps students make educational and employment gains in nursing and allied health care fields. Capital IDEA provides students with intensive wrap-around services and case management; financial sponsorship of tuition, fees and books; financial assistance with child care, transportation and emergency living expenses; and study groups and tutoring. In addition, for students who come to the program unprepared for college-level work, Capital IDEA offers an alternative developmental education program for Capital IDEA students called the College Preparatory Academy, jointly designed with the college and operated by the college.

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⁶ See pages 24-29 of Conway, Maureen, Amy Blair, and Matt Helmer, “Courses to Employment: Partnering to Create Paths to Education and Careers,” *The Aspen Institute*, 2012, available at <http://www.aspenwsi.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/C2E.pdf>.

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- **Carreras en Salud (Careers in Health)** in Chicago is a partnership between Instituto del Progreso (IDPL) Latino, Association House of Chicago, Wilbur Wright College Humboldt Park Vocational Education Center and the National Council of La Raza. Carreras en Salud works to address the shortage of bilingual health care providers in the Chicago area and to provide career advancement opportunities to low-income Latino workers. It is designed as an educational pathway that allows students to enter and exit over time, making incremental educational advances and gaining employment experiences at each step in the career ladder. The educational pathway includes training for four occupations: Certified Nursing Assistant, Certified Medical Assistant, Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) and Registered Nurse. To prepare students for these certificate and degree courses, Carreras en Salud offers pre-college training (GED prep, Vocational English as a Second Language and a pre-LPN course) at IDPL. In addition, participants have access to tuition assistance, counseling and asset-building services.
- The **Flint Healthcare Career Pathways Project** in Flint, Michigan, is a partnership involving Mott Community College and Flint STRIVE. The project helps low-income residents of Genesee County advance from entry-level and certified nursing assistant jobs to nursing and allied health care positions. The partnership works with the public workforce system and other nonprofit organizations to provide students with financial assistance for tuition, emergency assistance funds, case management, motivational support and other services. The partnership works with students over a multi-year period as they pursue degrees in nursing and allied health care careers.
- The **Logistics/Transportation Academy** in Los Angeles is a broad partnership involving Community Career Development, Inc., Los Angeles Valley Community College, East Los Angeles Community College and Los Angeles City Community College. The Academy prepares low-income adults for logistics and transportation jobs. The project includes a bridge program, specifically for the local transit authority, that provides pre-employment training to help fill vacant bus operator positions. The partnership began with a series of industry-specific training modules, designed with employer partners, to develop steps toward a recognized certificate and/or an associate degree that prepares individuals for jobs related to the area's port system, transportation and logistics businesses. Due to the economic downturn, the partnership initiated a new program to prepare individuals for entry-level security jobs and advancement opportunities. Participants have access to intensive case management, as well as assistance with child care, transportation, tuition waivers, books and other financial needs. Participants with criminal backgrounds also are offered workshops to learn how to expunge their criminal records.
- The **Training Futures** program in Fairfax County, Virginia, is a partnership between Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) and Northern Virginia Family Service (NVFS). Training Futures' curriculum provides 25 weeks of office skills training, including a three-week internship. Training Futures students are eligible for up to 17 college credits with NOVA upon completion of the program. Designed for non-traditional students, the program provides supportive services to address family needs, additional classroom time to aid students with limited English-language skills, and assistance in navigating college enrollment and financial aid processes. It also provides business immersion experiences through internships, mentoring and coaching by volunteers from the business community.

Navigating Entry into the Community College

Many adult learners have never been to college. Others have — but it's been years if not decades. As these adult learners walk onto a community college campus, they often encounter new, unfamiliar and sometimes intimidating college procedures. For many, the application process and the logistical challenges of enrolling and registering are the first stumbling blocks. “A lot of challenges students run into are just navigating the whole college enrollment process, and we tend to assume that it's very simple, just because we work within the institutions,” says Gayle Brousseau, Dean of Academic Affairs at East Los Angeles Community College.

Below are the key challenges that adult learners encounter when entering community college.

Hurdles to Applying and Enrolling

Some adult learners have trouble filling out a college application. Students with weak educational foundations, in particular, may struggle to understand the application questions, follow directions or provide sufficient detailed answers. Online applications may prove difficult for people with limited computer literacy skills. Students often must take a placement exam to begin taking coursework for credit. Some students fail to do well enough on the test to be able to take a for-credit course because they have been out of school for some time or are unfamiliar with online test formats. Their only option may be to enroll in basic skills courses or wait up to six months to retake the test, both of which slow their plans to get technical skills training and a good job.

To enroll and register for classes, a student often must visit numerous offices and departments. Bill Browning, former Director of Workforce Development at Northern Virginia Community College, refers to this process as “students being ping-ponged around campus.” As students go from office to office, they may encounter long lines, which can be challenging for adult learners who are pressed for time and need to get to work or pick up children from school.

Difficulty Understanding the College System

Adult learners also may be intimidated by the community college bureaucracy and its unfamiliar jargon and terminology. Some learners may become discouraged and decide college is not for them. “If you didn't grow up in a house where college was part of your culture and vocabulary, this is a completely foreign language,” says Susan Hoyne, Dean of Science, Mathematics and Manufacturing at Shoreline Community College in Seattle. Bill Browning formerly of Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) recalls talking to some Training Futures students about how they would earn NOVA college credits for their studies when one asked, “What's a credit?” Then, there are some learners who are too embarrassed or afraid to ask such a question. For foreign-born students and non-native English speakers, these challenges can be exacerbated by a lack of cultural understanding or by poor language skills.

Inadequate Career Counseling

Adult learners also may receive inadequate career counseling when they first arrive on campus and may only meet with college counselors once or twice before choosing their next career. Some college counselors lack up-to-date information about the skills and occupations in demand in their regional labor markets. As a result, some students may be ill-informed and end up pursuing training or credentials that are unlikely to lead to employment. In other instances, students may not receive information about the careers that best fit their needs or interests, or may not receive enough direction to know which classes to take. Left with cumbersome course catalogs to guide their decisions about educational and career paths, some students may waste time taking unnecessary courses or do not take courses they need.

Challenges in Applying for and Obtaining Financial Aid

Not surprisingly, finding a way to pay for tuition, books and other expenses is another huge wall that potential students must climb in order to attend community college. Applying for financial aid can be extremely intimidating and confusing for students who don't have previous college

experience. Although greatly simplified over the years, the form that students must fill out to apply for federal financial aid (grants, loans or scholarships) — known as the FAFSA, or Free Application for Federal Student Aid — still asks detailed questions about things such as income and residency status. And, many forms, such as the FAFSA, are increasingly completed online. “Online forms are especially troublesome, because our students don’t yet have the computer skills necessary to complete complex forms such as the FAFSA,” says Sharon Legrande, Program Manager at Northern Virginia Family Service. Students must often provide a previous year’s tax return or other financial documentation that can be difficult to obtain or locate, especially if they are immigrants who move frequently or low-income workers with unstable lives. FAFSA applications also require a PIN (personal identification number), which, if lost, can be difficult and time-consuming to retrieve. Financial aid deadlines also can easily escape a student’s attention.

Even when students are able to complete and submit the FAFSA, other issues may quickly arise. The time it takes to process the FAFSA may not fit a student’s timeframe for deciding whether to go to college or to take another low-paying job. For students who want to enter training quickly, the aid may not come soon enough. Follow-up requests from FAFSA administrators for additional documentation may be misunderstood or inadvertently ignored.

Financial aid packages may also not meet adult learners’ needs. For example, students who begin college in the spring may be offered less support than those starting fall semester, when more funding is traditionally available. Foreign-born learners with degrees from their home country, despite being low-income in the U.S., often are not awarded a federal Pell Grant because of restrictions on allowing students with degrees to obtain Pell Grants. Recently unemployed students who have no or limited income when they apply for aid, but previously earned a good salary, may not qualify for aid or know how to appeal the amount that they are awarded, based on their new circumstance and financial situation. Adult learners who work, but earn a small wage, may not qualify for aid. And, students who must attend school part time, due to work or family commitments, also may not qualify.

Adult learners who previously attended college also may be surprised to discover that a “registration hold” prevents them from registering for classes until they pay off previously unpaid enrollment fees, library fines or parking tickets. Finding financial support and help to deal with this can be challenging. They may walk off campus again, never to return.

College applications, college placement exams, registration and enrollment processes, and financial aid processes all can discourage people from taking community college classes. And, if they receive limited career counseling, they may end up taking the wrong classes or pursuing training that doesn’t fit their needs, interests or the skills in demand in the labor market. During the C2E project, representatives of nonprofit-community college partnerships described several strategies used to help adult learners get their feet firmly in the college door.

Strategies for Enrollment, Registration and Financial Aid

To overcome some of the challenges mentioned above, many partnership representatives described how they use a “high-touch” enrollment process whereby people, often in supervised or one-on-one settings, can apply for community college, register for classes, and apply for financial aid at an off-campus location that is more familiar or accessible. Examples include:

Providing Intensive Services Off Campus

At Training Futures in Virginia, where classes take place off campus, not at the main campus of Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA), students do not have to set foot on the larger NOVA campus to register for Training Futures. Instead, students complete the college application with assistance at an off-campus training facility. Students also complete practice paper copies of FAFSA forms in this supervised setting, and then staff help them fill out a real FAFSA online. Follow-up communications regarding students’ financial aid packages and additional documentation take place between Training Futures staff and the College Liaison, a community college staff member who works with nonprofit partners. According to staff from the partnership, “There isn’t a single step of the

process that the students (from Training Futures) have to show up on any of our campuses for.” This helps adult learners avoid the “ping-pong” effect described earlier. Once applications are processed, the College Liaison works with Training Futures staff and various college departments to enroll and register students in classes and to resolve any issues related to financial aid or registration holds.⁷

Outreach and Referral Services

Another innovative way to help adult learners enter college is for the college to send an enrollment team to the nonprofit partner’s office or to a One-Stop Career Center, which were established under the Workforce Investment Act and designed to provide a full range of assistance to job seekers in one setting. At the nonprofit or the One-Stop Center, college staff can help prospective students do several things in one location — apply for college, take the placement exam and apply for financial aid. “So when they go to campus, all they . . . have to do is go directly to class, as opposed to having to try to get there and navigate through the whole admission, registration, and financial aid process,” explains Robert Matthews, of Mott Community College, a partner in the Flint Healthcare Career Pathways Project.

To help students once they are on campus, some partnerships refer students to specific staff on site. For example, at Capital IDEA in Austin, the nonprofit has found “champions” at the community college who serve as single points of contact for students who need help with registration and financial aid.

Preparation for Community College Placement Exams

Many C2E partnerships offer adult learners help to prepare for college placement exams. At Training Futures in Virginia, where students are co-enrolled with the nonprofit organization and in the college, students begin their coursework first with Training Futures and become accustomed or re-accustomed to academics before taking the college placement exam. The partnership found this dramatically increased Training Futures students’ pass rate on the college test. In Austin, Capital IDEA offers

potential college students an intensive 12-week academic “boot camp” known as the College Preparatory Academy. The Academy builds basic skills and prepares people to take the Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA), which is required to enroll in for-credit coursework at a community college in Texas.

Supplemental Career Advising

Many C2E partnership participants are assessed and screened for the careers they wish to pursue before they start college training. In the C2E partnerships studied, nonprofit case managers often helped adult learners figure out suitable jobs and careers by intensively assessing students’ needs, interests and goals, and then trying to match that information with what employers need and what it takes to succeed in their industries. For example, in Austin, Capital IDEA provides case management and counseling to help direct students toward careers that are in demand in the local labor market and that match their needs, interests and capabilities. Because job development and placement are core functions of nonprofits such as Capital IDEA, they sometimes have a more accurate and timely understanding of the job market than their community college counterparts. Capital IDEA regularly communicates with an employer network of hospitals, clinics and other health care providers to stay informed about the skills and occupations in demand. The nonprofit’s career counselors use this information to steer students toward growing allied health care professions. Capital IDEA also recognizes that community college counselors play a significant role in helping students succeed. Capital IDEA case managers and Austin Community College career counselors have strong relationships and regularly communicate about individual students. Combining the resources of each institution increases the likelihood that adult learners will succeed.

Bridging Costs and Financial Aid Gaps

To resolve registration holds, such as overdue fees or tuition payments, that prevent a student from registering and can delay a student’s ability to restart their education, nonprofits may pay off students’ past fines or fees. At some partnerships,

⁷ To learn more details about Training Futures and how that particular partnership operates, please see “Training Futures: A Case Study of a Nonprofit-Community College Partnership,” available at <http://www.aspenwsi.org/resource/cteupdate3/>.

including Carreras en Salud in Chicago, college staff may temporarily lift their student's registration holds. Insufficient financial aid or a student's lack of finances can also result in a student unable to pay for books, transportation, or other costs associated with attending college. C2E partners often work together to find funding from various sources including the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), scholarship funds or resources from local foundations to help students cover these types of expenses. The table below summarizes some of the challenges that adult learners face entering community college and some of the solutions that partnerships use.

Providing additional attention and going the extra mile to make sure that adult learners are

enrolled in community college with financial aid support can make all the difference in determining whether an adult makes it into the classroom. However, as adult learners move into the classroom, they often face many other challenges.

Persisting to Completion

For many of today's community college students, completing their coursework can take some time. For adult learners, the road to completion can be even longer, with more twists, turns, detours and, sometimes, dead ends. C2E partners reported that they continually struggle to address the challenge of student persistence. Students did not complete coursework for several reasons, listed below.

Problem Area: Entering Community College

Potential Traps	Examples of Solutions
<p>College applications Online applications may cause difficulty and some questions may be misunderstood.</p>	<p>Students complete applications in a supervised setting with nonprofit staff (Training Futures, Virginia, and Automobile Career Pathways Project's GST Program, Seattle).</p>
<p>College placement exams Adult learners may lack the necessary basic skills or computer literacy needed to pass college placement exams to enter for-credit classes. Low scores may prohibit retaking the exam for lengthy periods of time.</p>	<p>Students take an intensive college preparatory class to build basic skills before taking the exam (College Preparatory Academy at Capital IDEA and Austin Community College). Students begin coursework and become accustomed to academics before taking the exam (Training Futures, Virginia).</p>
<p>Financial aid applications and processes Adult learners may find it difficult to complete the FAFSA, may lose PIN numbers or lack appropriate documentation</p>	<p>Students use practice FAFSA forms and then complete a real FAFSA in a supervised setting. The nonprofit partner manages correspondence with the college financial aid office (Training Futures, Virginia).</p>
<p>Logistics of enrollment and registration Adult learners may be "ping-ponged" around campus to apply for college, take placement exams, apply for financial aid and register for classes.</p>	<p>The college sends an "enrollment team" to the nonprofit's facility (Mott Community College, Healthcare Career Pathways Project, Michigan).</p>
<p>Registration holds Adult learners may not be able to register due to unpaid parking fines, library charges, tuition or fees.</p>	<p>College staff temporarily lifts a registration hold and the nonprofit pays the fine (Carreras en Salud, Chicago).</p>
<p>Inadequate career advising upon entry Adult learners may receive inconsistent advice about which careers to pursue, which courses to take, or when to take them.</p>	<p>Case managers at the nonprofit provide supplemental advising and regularly communicate with community college counselors (Capital IDEA, Austin).</p>

The Need for Basic Skills Development

One of the first barriers is the need to develop basic academic skills such as reading, math and writing. Nearly 50 percent of students pursuing an associate's degree, a community college academic degree designed to take two years of study, need some form of remediation, and these students are much less likely to earn a certificate or degree.⁸ For many students, having to take basic skills coursework may set their technical and career training back by months or even years, and some may never progress to certificate or associate-degree coursework. For adult learners who need to earn wages and complete training as soon as possible, being required to take basic skills classes before technical skills training can be a disincentive to return to school, because the process will take longer and reduce the likelihood that they will finish.

For learners who do make it through basic skills classes or initial English as a Second Language (ESL) coursework, the battle is not over. As they progress through their occupational training, classes become more difficult and advanced. Students who began their education with a weak basic skills foundation or are still mastering the English language may encounter new struggles as they take courses more steeped in technical content, math and science, or occupational jargon.

Lack of Confidence and Vision for Personal Success

For adult learners on the long and sometimes daunting road to completing a certificate or degree, issues of motivation and confidence can also deter their persistence. Low-income individuals, in particular, may struggle to see themselves as successful, and older adult learners, who never saw themselves as college students, may find it difficult to embrace this new identity. Individuals' self-esteem also can dip when their basic skills deficiencies appear. Some may label themselves, or be labeled by others, as "dumb" or "lazy," which lowers their confidence. Family and friends may not understand the demands that a student faces or be supportive. "I needed someone to say, 'You know what? You're worthy,'" recalls one Training Futures graduate, reflecting on her experience and the confidence issues she faced. "Training Futures helped me develop a new sense of self to get me out of the depression I was putting myself into."

When adult learners don't have a clear vision or clear expectations about what the training will accomplish, they also may lose their motivation to stick with a program.

Juggling Family, Work and School

Adult learners' self-esteem and motivation issues can be exacerbated by the stress of their personal lives and commitments. Juggling school and family schedules puts time constraints on adult learners. "It was hard because ... after school you had to come home, cook, make sure the kids get their homework done. Then I had to do my homework. So ... I was studying all day, every day, even on the weekends," recalls a student at Mott Community College in Flint. The need to work while in school adds another challenge. "There were times where I had to work the three to 11:30 [p.m.] shift the night before class," says a Carreras en Salud nursing student at Wilbur Wright Community College in Chicago. "So what did I have to do? I would come home by midnight, stay up until three or four in the morning, just to review. Wake up at six because I want to wake up early and read a little more for an exam." A student who has to juggle school, work and family commitments — and faces problems with transportation, child care, health care and housing — can easily be forced to drop out.

Insufficient Access to Support Services

While many community colleges offer support services such as child-care assistance, they often cannot serve the number of adult learners in need. To complicate the issue, many community college counselors are not prepared to help students who face problems with transportation, child care or housing. Many counselors are overwhelmed by the number of students they are assigned to work with, especially today, with rising enrollment and shrinking resources. As a result, many students receive career counseling that is more "transactional" or less personalized or geared to an individual's needs, interests and situation. "You sit and wait in line and meet somebody that you've never met before and will never see again," is the way one community college leader describes career counseling. Counselors may have limited opportunities to follow up with students and, in some instances,

⁸ (Complete College America, 2011).

are more accustomed to working with younger students and those seeking to transfer to a four-year institution. They also may not know about the resources available in the community, beyond the college campus, to help adult learners address challenges such as transportation or child care.

Strategies to Increase Student Persistence

One of C2E's key elements is to provide adult learners with academic and non-academic supports, including any counseling needed to complete training or education programs. During site visits to the six C2E partnerships, nonprofit and community college staff as well as students shared the following strategies used to help adult learners persist in community college.

College and Basic Skills Preparation

Because so many C2E partnership students lack basic math, reading or language skills, improving these skills is an important strategy. For example, the College Preparatory Academy run by the partnership between Capital IDEA and Austin Community College operates six hours a day, five days a week, for 12 weeks to help Capital IDEA participants prepare for and pass the Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA) to enter Austin Community College. Students receive over 300 hours of instruction in reading, writing, mathematics, test-taking and study skills, including ample opportunities to take practice THEA tests. Students who need additional instruction can opt for another 12 weeks of instruction (half-time). Instruction is provided by college faculty. Students interviewed about the Academy credit it with helping them not only pass the THEA exam, but also prepare for college. "I love that college preparatory deal," says one student in a focus group. "It was so much more than just learning stuff. It was really learning how to be a student in a proper way and how to apply those skills to what is going to be going on in the next level of your education. . . . I had never been taught that. I was really scared to go approach professors and teachers."

Integrating Technical and Basic Skills Instruction

In Washington state, many community colleges have adopted a fresh approach to meeting adult learners' need for academic remediation, using

a model called Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) that enables students to develop basic skills at the same time that they develop technical and occupational skills. In Seattle, at Shoreline Community College's General Service Technician program, which prepares students for entry-level employment in automotive repair and technology, two instructors team-teach students during the program's three quarters. One instructor helps students master automotive repair skills and knowledge. The other instructor is an Adult Basic Education (ABE) teacher who helps students develop basic reading, writing, math and language skills. The ABE teacher also models what it means to be a college student by addressing questions that some students may be too afraid or embarrassed to ask. Students in I-BEST programs report that the approach is very positive. "We have a basic skills teacher at the same time in the class . . . helping us with the vocabulary and pronunciation," recalls one student. This is helpful, the student adds, especially when the other teacher used unfamiliar automotive and professional terms. "Some of the class maybe didn't understand that. But, the basic skills teacher would come by and explain those terms to everybody."

In Chicago, Instituto del Progreso Latino (IDPL), the nonprofit partner in Carreras en Salud, also offers basic skills instruction and college preparation classes within the context of the health industry. IDPL offers an ESL for Health course for students who want to pursue a career in health care, but need to brush up on their English language skills. The course provides basic English language instruction plus a concentrated focus on the language and vocabulary needed to work in a health care setting. IDPL also offers a Vocational ESL class customized for adult learners who are training to be Certified Nursing Assistants.

Confidence and Motivational Supports

C2E partnerships also use a variety of approaches to help students remain motivated and positive while in school. They may help students to develop short-term and long-term goals and to set milestones for achieving those goals, so they can track their progress. Case managers from the nonprofit partner may regularly check in with students by phone or email to provide encouragement. "It gets a little rough out there . . . Getting that phone call, it just . . . gets you charged up again, like, 'Okay, I'm ready to get back out there again and just keep

going.’ Little things like that help a lot,” recalls a participant in the Logistics/Transportation Academy in Los Angeles, describing how his case manager at the nonprofit, Community Career Development, motivated him to continue training.

In other instances, the nonprofit may organize peer support groups. For example, Capital IDEA in Austin provides bi-monthly Vision, Initiative, Perseverance (VIP) sessions where students meet with a career counselor or case manager from Capital IDEA, as well as their peers from the same academic program. In the VIP sessions, students discuss academic, social and life issues that affect their studies. “VIP sessions provide a space to vent, to get peer support and to let students know they’re not in it alone,” says Dazzie McKelvy, former Deputy Executive Director of Capital IDEA.

At Training Futures in Virginia, students’ self-esteem and motivation are addressed through an approach known as “imaginal learning.” Based on the work of Kenneth Boulding,⁹ the approach stems from a theory that people’s behavior is determined by their image of themselves. Training Futures deliberately works to improve that self-image by providing training in a simulated, professional office environment where students must dress and act professionally. During training, adult learners also are introduced to over 500 motivational quotes during a six-month period. As a class, they dissect the quotes, discuss them and reflect on how they may apply to their personal goals.

Additional Academic Supports

As adult learners in C2E partnerships move through their educational and training pathways and encounter more difficult content, many partnerships offer additional support. For example, in Chicago, Carreras En Salud offers nursing students additional tutoring services. Instituto del Progreso Latino, one of the nonprofit partners in Chicago, also offers a “Pre-LPN” class to prepare students for community college training to be a Licensed Practical Nurse and the more difficult coursework that entails. To prepare adult learners involved in the Logistics/Transportation Academy in Los Angeles for online courses, East Los Angeles Community College offers the logistics students an initial online course on campus, in a supervised setting, to help students adjust to online learning.

Case Management and Access to a Range of Wrap-Around Services

For all of the C2E partnerships, wrap-around support services and financial assistance are a crucial part of helping students persist in training. Typically, the nonprofit partner links students to a wide array of services such as assistance with transportation, housing, child care, health care, substance abuse or domestic violence. To make these services available, nonprofits and community colleges blend a variety of funding streams and sometimes partner with other area human services organizations. Some services are provided to all students. For instance, Training Futures’ curriculum includes a trip for students to a local clothing closet, so students receive the professional clothing they need, at no expense. Other services are available, as needed. For example, in Austin, Capital IDEA has a relationship with a domestic violence shelter, which students are referred to if they need counseling or a safe place.

During the C2E project, nonprofit partners often described helping students plug financial gaps. The nonprofits first encourage students to be independent and address financial issues as best as they can on their own. But, they recognize that their students have limited finances and that unanticipated costs can prevent students from continuing their education. So if resources are available, nonprofits sometimes step in to help a financially struggling student, so the student will stay in school. This may mean paying to lift a registration hold on a college account; paying some tuition, fees or book costs not covered by financial aid; or helping out with emergency rent or utility expenses. During interviews, students often noted that this financial help, both small and large amounts, kept them in school. “Carreras En Salud pays for my tuition and then they also help with ... transportation costs,” explained a nursing student in the Chicago program. Having the program sort this out gives her “time to study or to dedicate to school. That’s how it’s helping me.”

Supplemental Assistance with Ongoing Career Planning and Counseling

The case management model used by nonprofits gives adult learners an intensive one-on-one relationship with a nonprofit case manager, which they sometimes need when “life happens,” when,

⁹ See Ronnie Seagren, “Imaginal Education: A Model that Goes Beyond ‘Schooling,’” *Transforming Education*, IC #18, Context Institute, Winter 1988, <http://www.context.org/iclib/ic18/seagren/> (accessed 17 December 2012).

say, a car breaks down, child-care arrangements fail or the food pantry is empty. This model also often provides adult learners with supplemental academic advising. The same case manager can help students figure out which classes to take and in what sequence or which instructors are best. This intensive assistance is extremely valuable for both adult learners and the colleges, which often lack the resources to provide such intensive case management. In response, some colleges are enhancing their career counseling services to help adult learners. At Northern Virginia Community College, the college has assigned some counselors to help Training Futures students figure out their next steps at the college after the Training Futures program, improving the likelihood that Training Futures students will continue their education.

The chart below summarizes some of the potential persistence traps for adult learners, as well as some of the potential solutions.

Transitioning to the Labor Market

As adult learners complete their training and education, transitioning to employment and the labor market poses new challenges. Finding job openings, writing resumes, and interviewing effectively, plus settling into a new work environment, may not come easy. This section describes where adult learners may stumble when moving into new career opportunities and how C2E partnerships ease the transition.

Limited Experience with Job Search, Interviews and Resumes

For some adult learners, completing a certificate or degree paves the way for their first attempt to enter the labor market, which, in turn, means having to learn new skills like how to build a

Problem Area: Persisting to Completion

Potential Traps	Examples of Solutions
<p>Need for basic skills remediation Adult learners may need to develop basic skills or language skills before moving into a technical or occupational program.</p>	<p>Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) model provides contextualized basic skills development, enabling students to develop basic and technical skills simultaneously (GST program, Seattle). Intensive “boot camp” offers basic skills courses (Capital IDEA, Austin).</p>
<p>Lack of motivation and low self-esteem Adult learners may find it difficult to view themselves as college students and quickly become discouraged.</p>	<p>“Imaginal learning” approach transforms students’ self-perceptions through guided imagery (Training Futures, Virginia). Nonprofit establishes peer support groups to help students develop supportive networks (Capital IDEA, Austin).</p>
<p>No connection to non-academic supports College may lack connections to wrap-around support services that adult learners need.</p>	<p>Case management model with nonprofit partner providing link to assistance with transportation, housing, health care, child care, etc. (All).</p>
<p>Need for additional academic supports Adult learners with a weak educational foundation may find it challenging to succeed as coursework in their occupational program grows more difficult.</p>	<p>Partnership provides additional tutoring for nursing students at convenient hours for adult learners (Carreras en Salud, Chicago). College provides an introductory and supervised class in online learning to help students adjust to online learning (Logistics/Transportation Academy, Los Angeles).</p>

resume, conduct a job search and interview. For others who previously worked, say, for one employer for many years, these skills may be rusty. During C2E project interviews, community college and nonprofit leaders noted that some of their students did not know how to look for a job, prepare for a job interview or organize a resume. Some students also didn't realize that approaches to resumes and interviews may differ by industry.

Limited Work Experience

In today's labor market, many employers require work experience before they will interview or hire an employee. For some adult learners, finding employment can be difficult, because they lack work experience or have experience in a sector different from the one in which they are pursuing a job after their recent training. In some instances, the work experience of foreign-born workers done in their native countries may not be valued or recognized by employers in the U.S.

Limited Employment Networks

While an industry-valued credential or degree can provide a gateway to a better job, paths to employment still largely depend upon a job seeker's personal and professional networks. Many jobs are not advertised or promoted publicly, research has shown. Many people find jobs through friends, family or professional networks. "Employers fill the majority of job openings through the unadvertised, or hidden, job market,"¹⁰ according to a Department of Labor study. Today, with at least four unemployed persons per every job opening, networks are all the more essential.¹¹ Adult learners, particularly those who are low-income, often lack these essential networks. A survey of over 1,100 low-income job seekers showed that 75 percent contacted fewer than five people to help find a job.¹²

Many community colleges, in general, are not well equipped to help students build networks or transition to employment. Although employment

is a major goal for students attending community college, colleges are often more focused on helping students to complete their training, with the assumption that a job will follow. Community colleges often have career services offices where students can view job postings, search for jobs online, or get help with resumes and interviewing skills. Staff in these offices serve students who are involved in a variety of degree or certificate programs and are seeking jobs in a variety of industries. But, these career counselors often lack substantial knowledge of specific industries and are unlikely to have deep connections to employers and employees within any one industry. As a result, adult learners may have limited opportunities on campus to meet with and connect to employers, or to learn about job openings that are not advertised publicly.

Unrealistic Expectations about Work Qualifications and Requirements

Adult learners may lack realistic expectations about employment after they complete training. For example, some may expect to easily find a job or to earn a higher wage than their previous wage. If they are going to school in order to change careers, they may be unprepared for their new work environment and culture. Reattaching to the labor market and retaining employment, therefore, can be difficult.

Limited Strategies for Career Advancement

For many students, their first job after training is an entry-level job, and they may not know what additional skills or experience they need to advance. They also may lack the networks to find out about better opportunities with different employers. As a result, they are at risk of getting stuck in low-paying jobs. In some instances, additional education or training may be needed to advance, and returning to school, once again, can present many of the same challenges described previously.

¹⁰ Jones, Elka, "Getting Back to Work: Returning to the Workforce after an Absence," *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*, U.S. Department of Labor, Winter 2004-2005. <http://www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2004/winter/art03.pdf> (accessed 10 November 2011).

¹¹ Bureau of Labor and Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey Highlights*, September 2012, http://www.bls.gov/web/jolts/jlt_labstatgraphs.pdf (accessed 14 November 2012).

¹² Wyckoff, Laura, and Carol Clymer, "Networks: A Guide to Expanding the Employment Networks of Low-Income People," Public/Private Ventures, 2006, http://www.ppv.org/ppv/publications/assets/210_publication.pdf (accessed 14 November 2011).

Strategies to Help Adult Learners Transition to the Labor Market

During C2E project interviews, focus groups and discussions, several strategies used to aid students' transition in employment were mentioned, including:

Helping Students Develop Realistic Expectations about Employment

C2E staff described several ways that they help students set realistic expectations about employment in specific industries. Capital IDEA and Training Futures both use alumni as guest speakers who talk about their jobs and work environments during classroom visits with students. Sometimes, employers visit the classroom or invite students for worksite visits, so students can get a feel for the working conditions and environment. The GST program at Shoreline Community College in Seattle requires students to complete an internship, which gives them practice conducting a job search, as well as exposure to the auto repair industry's work environment and culture. The training location and environment also give students the chance to experience and explore the industry.

Providing Work-Like Training Environments and Internships

At Training Futures in Virginia, the training simulates a professional office environment. Students must follow a dress code and attendance policy. They undergo "performance evaluations" with their "supervisor" to assess how they are doing in training and where they need to improve. Because the training facility is housed within a professional office building, students are exposed to and network with office professionals. They also take turns answering the office phones and leading visitor tours. Trainees also are mentored by career professionals from companies such as Booz Allen Hamilton, a corporate and government consulting firm. "In Training Futures, not only do you have the knowledge base of the trainers. They bring a lot of volunteers from Booz Allen Hamilton and other people who have experience in government and private sector who can help you with your resume and job interviewing skills," notes a Training Futures student. Training Futures and the GST program in Seattle also require students to participate in internships, which gives them valuable work experience they can list on their resume.

Combined Efforts to Engage Employers and Industry

Successfully helping adult learners transition to the labor market depends, in large part, upon the level of industry knowledge and engagement that job training and education programs have. Within each C2E partnership, an individual partner's efforts to build industry knowledge and relationships often complement or support the other partners' efforts. As each partner institution taps into its own industry connections, at various points and for different reasons, the overall industry network grows and, with it, the intelligence that informs curriculum and training design, approaches to providing participants with support services, and job placement and retention strategies.

In most C2E partnerships, the community college typically engages industry to inform curriculum and skills training approaches, while the nonprofit partner assumes the role of job development. In the job development role, nonprofit staff talk to employers about their businesses, skill needs, workforce challenges, and available job or internship openings. Equipped with this information, staff members provide students with intensive and industry-customized assistance during their job search, resume writing, job application and job interview preparation.

One example of the benefits of this joint employer and industry engagement is illustrated by the Automobile Career Pathways Project's GST program in Seattle. Through its employer and industry relationships in the auto industry, Shoreline Community College built a state-of-the-art automotive facility on its campus, where manufacturers such as Toyota and General Motors provide company training to their incumbent employees, such as their current mechanics and technicians from across the Pacific Northwest. Because GST students train at the same facility as these industry professionals, they benefit from learning in a setting similar to a dealership or garage that is equipped with the industry's best tools and technology. This, plus their instruction by industry experts, can provide excellent networking opportunities.

At the same time, Shoreline's nonprofit partner, the Workforce Development Council of Seattle – King County, created and funded a new position, a Career Navigator, who is an employee of Pacific Associates, a for-profit provider of employment and training services. The Career Navigator

helps current GST students and graduates obtain employment and advancement opportunities by engaging with employers and industry. The Career Navigator works with adult learners during and after training. To help find internships, jobs and career advancement opportunities, the Career Navigator builds relationships with dealerships and independent repair shops, keeping abreast of job openings and encouraging employers of current, past, or potential GST students to sponsor their training or to provide time off from work to participate.

Employment Retention Efforts and Work Supports

Nonprofit partners in C2E partnerships also help students keep their jobs in a variety of ways. Sometimes, they help students with transportation, housing or child-care costs, until the students' finances stabilize. Sometimes, they check in with students, after job placement, to see how they are doing and to ensure that their transition to work is going smoothly. Capital IDEA in Austin formed an alumni group of former students, so the partnership

Problem Area: Transitioning to the Labor Market

Potential Traps	Examples of Solutions
<p>Limited experience with job search, resume building or interviewing Adult learners, recently displaced from the labor market, may have not conducted a job search in quite some time. And, for some, it may be their first time looking for a job. As a result, they may lack the ability to successfully conduct a job search, write a resume, and interview for a job.</p>	<p>Nonprofit partner provides intensive and industry-specific assistance career planning, job search, resume development, interview preparation and job placement (All).</p>
<p>Limited work experience Adult learners with limited work experience or no work experience in their new industry of focus may struggle to find employment.</p>	<p>Students participate in internships to provide them with work experience and hands-on learning opportunities (Automobile Career Pathways Project's GST Program in Seattle and Training Futures in Virginia).</p>
<p>Lack of professional networks or opportunities to network with employers Community college staff may lack the networks they need to keep abreast of job openings and refer adult learners to employment opportunities.</p>	<p>A Career Navigator builds relationships with employers to pick up information about job openings and internship possibilities (Automobile Career Pathways Project's GST Program, Seattle).</p>
<p>Focus on training completion, not employment Adult learners who assume they'll get jobs after training can later struggle to find jobs.</p>	<p>Use of the sector approach, which targets the employment opportunities that are in demand within a specific industry (All).</p>
<p>Unrealistic expectations about industry or occupation Adult learners' expectations about salary, work culture or ease of getting a job may lessen their chances of employment and/or keeping a job.</p>	<p>Training occurs in an environment that simulates the workplace for the targeted industry (Training Futures, Virginia).</p>
<p>Lack of support after a job placement Adult learners may lose or quit a job prematurely if supports that were available pre-placement are no longer available post-placement.</p>	<p>Nonprofit remains engaged with students post-placement through alumni groups and through ongoing case management to ensure that students succeed in new careers (Capital IDEA, Austin).</p>

can help alumni troubleshoot any issues that arise and leverage former students' success and experience as a resource for future students. The chart on the previous page is a summary of the challenges that adult learners face when transitioning to the labor market and some of the strategies that C2E partnerships use to make this transition successful.

Final Thoughts

Many American workers need to re-tool their skills in order to compete for jobs. Community colleges are at the heart of this re-tooling process. Many adult learners, however, face obstacles that prevent them from succeeding in community college — obstacles that have little to do with their potential to learn. Issues with college applications, course registration, placement exams and financial aid can erase adult learners' hopes and dreams of a new career before they step foot in a classroom. When they take classes, often for the first time, adult learners may need to address basic skills deficiencies, low self-esteem or inadequate career planning. Even if they overcome these obstacles, other obstacles such as a lack of transportation, child care, proper housing and/or insufficient funds to cover tuition expenses can force many adults out of training and into or — back into — dead-end jobs. Plus, their limited professional networks or the limited job placement and retention supports available may make them feel like their training was for naught.

But, the many challenges that adult learners often face in community colleges are not insurmountable,

as this report demonstrates. The C2E research documents how community colleges and nonprofits are collaboratively and innovatively responding to help adult learners avoid some of the “traps” that can prevent them from completing training and improving their job prospects. Students served by C2E partnerships showed impressive educational and employment outcomes. Other colleges, nonprofit organizations, investors and policymakers would be wise to consider developing similar partnerships and investing resources in similar strategies, in order to help other adult learners succeed in post-secondary education and the labor market.

As the nation faces a dynamic and demanding global economy, adult learners on community college campuses are here to stay. Given the pace of technological change, a significant segment of the adult workforce likely will need to return, periodically, to the classroom to “skill-up.” Thus, helping community colleges better serve adult learners and better meet their needs is not just a temporary pressing issue resulting from the current economic crisis. It is an economic imperative that must be addressed in order to build and sustain a stronger economy for decades to come. As community colleges strive to better meet the needs of adult learners, we hope the C2E partnerships' strategies discussed in this report offer some promising ideas about how they can help more of their students succeed.



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